

# **The Possibilities and Challenges of Developing Teachers' Social Justice Beliefs**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the impact of a course that focused on social equity teaching, and particularly, teachers' attitudes toward the capacities of students in culturally nondominant communities. Findings from surveys and written documents reveal that course participants were better able to recognize students' inherent abilities and knowledge traditions than non-participants. The course was less effective in helping teachers recognize English language learners' abilities and teachers' own role in challenging school inequalities and making a positive difference the life trajectories of students. Results indicate a need for greater emphasis on challenging language stereotypes and promoting teacher activism.

**Keywords:** teacher education, social justice, teacher attitudes, beliefs

The majority of teachers educated today come from mainstream backgrounds, and their dominant status relative to growing numbers of students from nondominant cultural communities leaves them susceptible to underestimating these students' literacy abilities. This is because many hold naive and uncomplicated views about schooling, race, and literacy (Lazar, 2007). They often subscribe to the meritocratic view that achievement depends solely on one's merits and work habits (Castro, 2010) and tend to blame students and their caregivers for "failing" at school rather than recognizing "the system of failure embedded in institutional practices that disfavors and disenfranchises minority groups" (p. 207).

It is possible to challenge deficit perspectives through teacher education programs that infuse social justice goals (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Examining inequalities, engaging in personal reflections of self and others, and participating in action research within schools and communities have helped teachers develop understandings about student capacity and their own responsibility for teaching (Zeichner, 2009). Programs have also focused on developing teachers' understandings about relationships between race, class, culture, literacy, and language (Ball, 2009; Lazar, 2007) and developing understandings about students' cultural capital and building on students' existing knowledge through culturally responsive teaching (Gutierrez & Lee, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amati, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009). It is especially important that teacher education occur in the context of inquiry communities and focus on developing intellectual, political, and critical stances (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

While social justice goals are considered vital to promoting social activism among teachers, they are threatened by the current political climate that focuses on the evaluation of teachers on the basis of students' standardized test scores (Zeichner, 2009). Teachers are not encouraged to advocate for students and challenge programs and policies that undermine student

achievement; rather, they are criticized for failing to raise test scores. In such a climate, social justice education takes a back seat to professional development programs that focus on test preparation and skill development. While social justice teaching is a fundamental goal of many teacher education programs, it is still not a core value across all programs (Zeichner, 2009). Without compelling research that shows the significance of social justice goals in teacher preparation, there is little hope that they will universally prioritized in these programs.

Teacher educators need to evaluate how their programs prepare teachers to serve students from nondominant cultural communities. Toward this goal, I will explore the impact of a course called “Sociology of Literacy” on teachers’ social justice beliefs, and particularly, their views toward the capacities of students.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Course**

Set in an urban-based university in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., 41 teachers participated in the Sociology of Literacy course. I compared the responses of this group to 46 teachers who did not take the course. Ninety-five percent of the teachers in both groups were white, five percent were African American, and almost all considered themselves middle class. All but three were women. The majority were novice teachers with less than five years of teaching experience.

The Sociology of Literacy course involved reading and responding to research on the following topics: the complexity of culture, issues related to social inequality, institutional racism, poverty, white privilege and racial identity, language variation and identity, emergent bilingualism, cultural capital, and culturally responsive instruction. Teachers wrote reflectively about these topics and shared their insights in small and whole group discussions.

Teachers also participated in the ABC Model of Cultural Understanding and Communication (Ruggiano-Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006). This involved writing an autobiography that includes information about family, beliefs, values, traditions, racial/ethnic identity, and their ways of being privileged or subordinated based on race, class, gender, or other affiliations. Teachers wrote about their access to school-valued literacy practices and mainstream language communities. Teachers also wrote a biography of someone culturally different from themselves after interviewing this person about key life events, similar to those addressed in their own autobiographies. They also addressed topics related to culture, power, or privilege, based on their level of comfort in discussing these issues with interviewees. For the cross-cultural analysis, teachers compared their autobiographies to the biographies and generate a list of similarities and differences between themselves and the person they interviewed.

## **Data Sources & Analysis**

### **Surveys**

Both teacher groups were asked to respond to twelve statements on the survey, *Learning to Teach for Social Justice – Beliefs (LTSJ-B)* (Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, Mitescu,

2008; see Appendix). This instrument is designed to measure key beliefs associated with social justice. These include: 1) high expectations and rich learning opportunities for all pupils; 2) an asset-based perspective on the cultural, linguistic and experiential resources pupils and families bring to school; 3) the importance of critical thinking in a democratic society; 4) the role of teachers as advocates and agents for change; 5) challenges to the notion of a meritocratic society; 6) teaching as an activity that is related to teachers' deep underlying assumptions and beliefs about race, class, gender, disability, and culture; and 7) the idea that issues related to culture, equity, and race ought to be part of what is visible in all aspects of the curriculum.

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of the survey statements using a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, 5 strongly agree). Seven of the 12 items (3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12) are negatively worded such that low scores (1 or 2) on these items are associated with a stronger social justice orientation. These were reversed scored (e.g.: negatively worded statement receiving a score of "1" was changed to a "5") and consequently the statement was reversed in my analysis (e.g.: Statement #10, "it's not their job to change society" was changed to "it is their job to change society"). This allowed for consistency in scoring as all high (4 or 5) scores were aligned with a social justice orientation.

Means for each item were calculated and compared using independent sample t-tests. The central question of the study is the degree to which the Sociology of Literacy course could challenge teachers' deficit attitudes toward students from nondominant communities. For this, I focus the analysis on those items and responses that relate to teachers' understanding of student capacity. These include the negatively worded Items 6: *It's reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students who don't speak English as their first language* and 9: *Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom*.

## Written Statements

Teachers were asked to write in response to the following statement: *Please describe how you would approach teaching students in urban high poverty communities*. Thirty-six "Course" teachers and 33 "non-course" teachers chose to participate. Teachers were given 20 minutes to write a response. These papers were read and open-coded for themes and patterns (Charmaz, 2006). Statements were coded as either an "assertion" or "assumption." Assertions were either recommendations for instruction (28 codes) or statements about urban school conditions (11 codes), or the impact on teachers (1 code). Assumptions were generalizations about students' homes/caregivers (7 codes) or students (10 codes). All of the codes were displayed with the identification numbers of the teachers who wrote them. Percentages of statements from course and non-course teachers were calculated. The most salient differences between the two groups are reported, as well as central trends among the items, especially as they relate to teachers' beliefs about student capacity.

Analysis involved examining consistencies within and between data sets. Based on general trends across these sets, I generated assertions about the course impact, and lack of impact, on teachers' understandings.

## Findings

### Surveys

Course teachers scored higher on all 12 LTSJ-B survey items, and significantly higher on four of the twelve items than teachers who did not take the course. Findings from the survey show that the course had a significant impact on teachers' understandings about the need to examine one's own attitudes and beliefs about race, class, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation (Item 1; Course: 4.82, No Course: 4.29;  $p < .01$ ). There were also significant differences between three of the negatively worded items: 1) *For the most part, covering multicultural topics is only relevant to certain subject areas such as social studies and literature* (Item 3, Course: 4.46, No Course: 2.65;  $p < .001$ ), 2) *Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom* (Item 9, Course: 4.34 C, No Course: 3.61;  $p < .01$ ), and 3) *Although teachers have to appreciate diversity; it's not their job to change society* (Item 10, Course: 4.02, No Course: 3.45;  $p < .05$ ). Based on these four items, the course helped teachers recognize the importance of: 1) examining one's own attitudes toward several dimensions of cultural diversity, 2) addressing multicultural topics not just in social studies and literature, but throughout the curriculum, 3) recognizing that economically disadvantaged students bring something value (presumably knowledge or understandings) to the classroom, and 4) that teachers' role is to not only appreciate diversity, but to also change societal views to be more accepting of diversity.

The finding that course teachers recognized student capacity, based on their higher rates of disagreement to Item 9 (*Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom*), was not matched by their responses to a similar Item, #6 (*It's reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students who don't speak English as their first language*). While course teachers disagreed with Item 6 at a higher rate than non-course teachers (more consistent with a social justice orientation), the difference was not significant.

Course teachers' significantly higher rates of disagreement with statement #10 (*Although teachers have to appreciate diversity; it's not their job to change society*), reflected their tendency to identify as change agents. Yet there was no significant difference between the two groups in their response to other statements that related to teacher advocacy. Both groups tended to agree with statement #7: *Part of the responsibilities of the teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities* (Course=4.21; No Course=4.15). One explanation is that statement #7 may have been interpreted as more reasonable than #10 because it includes the qualifying phrase "part of the responsibilities of the teacher." In other words, "challenging school arrangements" could be *one of many* teaching responsibilities and therefore it is plausible that even those who do not have strong social justice views would agree with this. Yet there was no significant difference between the groups in response to statement #12: *Realistically, the job of a teacher is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead*. Both groups tended to be fairly uncertain about this statement (Course=2.82; No-Course=2.76). Those who felt that teachers could change the life trajectories of students would disagree with this statement.

## Written Comments

There were some consistencies between survey responses and teachers' written comments in the area of recognizing student capacity. An analysis of the two teacher groups' written comments shows very distinct patterns of response to the prompt: *Please describe how you would approach teaching students in urban high poverty communities.* Table I below indicates that statements written by course teachers were more focused on recognizing student capacity than those who did not take the course. Course teachers wrote much more consistently about teachers' need to know students and value their knowledge:

Table 1.

### *Teachers' Assertions about Capacity of Students in Urban High Poverty Communities*

"Teachers should/must..."	Non-Course Teachers N=33	Course Teachers N=36
Treat each student as a valuable resource.	3	36
Recognize students' "funds of knowledge."	0	19
Build on students' prior knowledge.	0	14
Learn about students' communities.	0	14
Recognize students' home literacies.	0	11
Validate students' home language.	0	11

More than a third of the course teachers indicated that teachers should recognize students as valuable resources in the classroom, and almost one-fifth stated specifically that students' funds of knowledge should be recognized. Course teachers who included either type of statement account for 55.5% of the group. Further 66.6% (24 out of 36) of teachers who participated in the course included at least one or more of these statements in their written response. None of the non-course teachers recognized urban students' knowledge as valuable. The trend of course teachers recognizing students' capacity is matched by their relative absence of negative commentary about students and their caregivers. Table 2 shows that none of these teachers made negative comments about students or their caregivers:

Table 2.

### *Teachers' Assertions about Students and Their Caregivers*

I feel that...	Non-Course Teachers n=33	Course Teachers N=36
1. Caregivers do not care about their children's education.	24	0
2. Students do not care about their education.	6	0
3. Students come to school with little/no prior knowledge.	6	0

Table 2 shows that nearly a quarter of those who did not take the course indicated that caregivers did not care about their children's education. Additionally, several teachers in this group wrote certain kinds of statements about students that were not shared by course teachers. These include: 1) students could not put as much effort into school because of outside responsibilities, 2) students must be employed to help pay the bills, 3) students do not develop at a normal rate, 3) low literacy abilities exist at home, and 4) students have few highly educated role models.

These tables reflect salient differences between the teacher groups in the area of recognizing student capacity. About two-thirds of course teachers acknowledged student capacity in some form, where only one of the non-course teachers did. Additionally two of the teachers who did not take the course indicated that students brought little to no prior knowledge to school. Written statements indicate that teachers who did not participate in the course tended not acknowledge students' intellectual or academic capacities.

### **Consistencies/Inconsistencies across Data Sets**

Two-thirds of the course teachers recognized student capacity in their written statements and this finding matched these teachers' higher level of disagreement that economically disadvantaged students brought less to the classroom. Additionally, none of the course teachers commented negatively about students or their caregivers, as did some non-course teachers. While not a significant difference between the two groups, more course teachers disagreed with statement 6: *"It is reasonable to have lower expectations for students who do not speak English as their first language."* Consistent with this finding, about one-tenth of course teachers recognized the worth of students' home language in their written comments yet none of the non-course teachers discussed the value of students' home language.

Findings were inconclusive about the impact of the course on strengthening teachers' sense of activism. More course teachers felt it was teachers' job to change society to appreciate diversity, but none wrote about this. There were no significant differences between the two groups regarding teachers' responsibility to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities or the idea that the job of teachers is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead. No teacher from either group provided written commentary related to these items, as most focused on how they would serve students instructionally.

### **Significance/Implications**

Teachers who took the Sociology of Literacy course conveyed beliefs that were more consistent with social justice goals than those who did not take the course. Findings also showed that differences between course and non-course teachers were robust in some areas, such as acknowledging students' capacity, although not as in the area of valuing students' linguistic capital or articulating understandings about the institutional and societal structures that advantage or disadvantage particular communities.

A generally acknowledged tenet in this body of research is that one course will not produce teachers who fully appreciate and own social justice perspectives. It is necessary, however, to define the possibilities and limitations of individual courses so that they may be improved. Having teachers complete the ABC project with emergent bilingual students might improve teachers' recognition of students' cultural and linguistic capital. More specific



explorations of how students' native language bolsters their acquisition of English would be necessary for raising teachers' expectations of emergent bilinguals (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010). The findings also inform a more explicit focus on the roles of teachers as activists. This calls for course experiences that go beyond reflecting on inequalities, to actually being in the company of teachers who are involved in activist-oriented work in schools.

## Conclusion

Findings from this study affirm that the Sociology of Literacy course made a difference in helping teachers acquire a social justice orientation, especially in the areas of valuing culturally responsive teaching practices and seeing students' capacities. These align with two of the dimensions of social justice teaching discussed by Cochran-Smith (2010): promoting equity in learning opportunities and outcomes for students and **respecting the knowledge traditions of students from all cultural groups**. The course might make an even greater difference if it was fortified by internship experiences with more expert teachers who see students' capacity and work as student advocates and activists in their schools. I believe these components would contribute to the value of the course for helping teachers acquire the social justice orientation they need to serve students in nondominant communities.

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## Appendix

### The *Learning to Teach for Social Justice*—Beliefs Scale (Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, Mitescu, 2008)

Directions: Respond to the statements below using the following Likert categories:  
Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Uncertain=3, Agree=4, Strongly Agree=5

1	An important part of learning to be a teacher is examining one's own attitudes and beliefs about race, class, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation
2	Issues related to racism and inequity should be openly discussed in the classroom.
3R*	For the most part, covering multicultural topics is only relevant to certain subjects areas, such as social studies and literature.
4	Good teaching incorporates diverse cultures and experiences into classroom lessons and discussions.
5R*	The most important goal in working with immigrant children and English language learners is that they assimilate into American society.
6R*	It's reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students who don't speak English as their first language.
7	Part of the responsibilities of the teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities.
8	Teachers should teach students to think critically about government positions and actions.
9R*	Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom.
10R*	Although teachers have to appreciate diversity, it's not their job to change society.
11R*	Whether students succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work.
12R*	Realistically, the job of a teacher is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead.

\*R: Statements are reverse scored.